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INFANT BAPTISM

CONSIDERED ;

IN AN

ADDRESS TO A PARISHIONER.

It is certain that little or nothing new can be said concerning Infant Baptism. Still, as the same truth is sometimes more easily perceived in one light than in another, I have determined to place before you a few well-known arguments on the subject, hoping that I may be able to remove the difficulties which you feel with regard to this practice of the Church.

Your chief difficulties, if I mistake not, rest upon two grounds: first, that there is no direct command in Scripture to baptize infants, and no positive record of their being baptized; secondly, that there are certain passages of Scripture from which you infer that infants are not fit objects for Baptism.

With respect to the first of these difficulties I answer generally, that there are many practices on the propriety of which most Christians agree, although no positive command or even example of them is to be found in the Bible.

For instance: you do not doubt that marriage should be solemnized by a religious ceremony, yet

the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost . . . and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world ⁵ ;” or, as the command is recorded by St. Mark, “Go ye into all the world, and preach the Gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved ; but he that believeth not shall be damned ⁶ .”

‘Yes,’ you say, “he that believeth and is baptized ;” ‘believers’ Baptism only is meant.’ This, therefore, brings us to consider your second difficulty mentioned above. You say that there are many passages of Scripture from which it may be inferred that infants are not fit objects for Baptism. You argue thus : ‘It is written, “repent, and be baptized,” “he that believeth, and is baptized ;” but a child cannot repent, a child cannot believe—therefore, a child cannot be baptized.’

Now if this argument is good, it will prove likewise, that, for the very same reason, a child cannot be saved. We are taught in Scripture that faith is necessary for salvation : but you surely will not say that because children have not faith, no child can be saved. If, then, want of faith is, in your opinion, no impediment to the salvation of infants, why do you maintain that it is an impediment to their Baptism ? In the same way, we are told in Scripture that repentance is as necessary to salvation as it is to Baptism, but the want of repentance surely cannot exclude infants from salvation ; therefore, the want of repentance cannot exclude them from Baptism.

You will see, then, that there is something wrong

⁵ Matt. xxviii. 19, 20.

⁶ Mark xvi. 15, 16.

in your argument ; and it is this : Children are, by you, confounded with unbelieving adults, ‘those who believe not.’ The opposition in Scripture is between one who believes, and one who believes not ; that is to say, one who has the power of believing, but will not believe : “He that believeth shall be saved ; but he that believeth not shall be damned.” The unbelieving and unrepenting adult is shut out, by this rule, both from Baptism and salvation ; but not the infant, who, if not a believer in one sense, is certainly not an unbeliever.

Thus, again, it is said in Scripture, that they that are Christ’s have crucified the flesh ; from which it might be argued, but surely very unsoundly, that an infant is not Christ’s, because he cannot crucify the flesh ; yet if he be not Christ’s, he has no title to salvation through Him. Again the Scripture says, if any man would not work, neither should he eat ; but children, the sick, and the aged, cannot work ; and therefore, it might be argued, neither must they eat.

The unreasonableness of the above arguments is readily seen ; yet they are founded on precisely the same principles as is the argument against the Baptism of infants, derived from their inability to believe. All these arguments proceed upon the mistaken supposition, that because certain conditions and qualifications are required of persons capable of them, in order to their obtaining particular benefits, therefore the same qualifications are required of persons who are not capable of them, as indispensable conditions of their obtaining the same benefits.

Let me particularly impress the rule upon you, that, wherever belief is spoken of in Scripture as

necessary to any gift, grace, or blessing, it always means that it is necessary only for those who are able to believe. It does not exclude, or shut out, those who, from tender age, or other circumstances, are unable to do so; otherwise, the whole race of infants, and indeed all young children, would be deprived of every Gospel blessing, and, should they die, would die without the promise of salvation.

In the case of an infant, his weakness and freedom from actual sin render faith impossible, and repentance unnecessary. These graces therefore are only required of the child when he arrives at a sufficient age for the exercise of them. (How soon they may be wrought in the soul, by God's grace, increasing as the faculties of the child increase, and growing with his growth, is a different question.) Hence it is that sponsors promise for children. The infant being, for these and other reasons hereafter mentioned, a fit candidate for Baptism, enters formally into covenant with Christ in the presence of the Church. Not being, however, able to speak for himself, he speaks through others, the sponsors, and through them makes a profession of faith, and a promise to lead a Christian life, and is taught, as soon as he is able to understand, what a solemn vow, promise, and profession he has made by them. Sponsors perform the part of guardians: they enter into an agreement for the child, who is bound to fulfil that agreement, exactly as a man is bound to fulfil the covenants or agreements which his guardians have made in his behalf. Sponsors are not essential to the Sacrament of Baptism; and hence when Baptism is administered to infants in private, there are no sponsors; and if the child die, we are

assured that it is a valid Baptism ; but if the child survive, he is openly admitted into the congregation ; and then, because the child will have Christian duties to perform, as he grows older, it is required that he shall have sponsors, who may undertake in his behalf that he shall perform these duties. I say, then, that the command of our Saviour being universal, we are to consider infants as included, unless some special reason for their exclusion should appear, which does not seem to be the case : they are to be made disciples, or proselytes, as far as infants are capable of being made such ; that is to say, they are to be admitted into the Gospel covenant, and as they increase in understanding, so must they be taught the doctrines and duties of that covenant.

Again, from a consideration of the persons to whom our blessed Lord addressed the command, "Go, teach (or make disciples of) all nations," we shall see that it was most probable, if not certain, that He intended infants to be included. Those persons were Jews—men who knew that the Church of God had received infants into covenant for hundreds of years ; men who had seen their Master Himself take up infants and bless them, and had heard Him declare that "of such is the kingdom of Heaven." Such men would rather have required an express command, if they were to leave off the universal practice of receiving infants into covenant, than any particular direction, if they were to baptize infants.

With them, it would have been a matter of course : and hence it probably is, that the Scriptures seem to be silent on the subject, only alluding to it in general terms, such as, "I baptized the household of Ste-

phanas⁷." Lydia was baptized and her household⁸. The jailor at Philippi was baptized, "he and all his"⁹. In truth, the infants are included in the household: they share in the joys and sorrows, in the prosperity and adversity, the belief and unbelief, of the whole family. This unity, this oneness of households, is particularly to be noticed throughout Scripture.

It may be well here to notice another argument of yours, namely, that because many of the first converts to Christianity were baptized when grown up, we must be baptized in the same manner. The fact is, that the Gospel, requiring a change in religion, must, like every other change, have begun with adults; just as at the present day in heathen countries our ministers baptize believing adults; but that does not prevent them from baptizing their children. If our missionary records were to go down to future ages, any person who read them would find a number of adult Baptisms recorded, and but little in comparison said about the Baptism of children; but we know that it would be very far from the truth to conclude from this circumstance, that missionaries in the present day do not baptize children, or that the Church in those foreign countries considers Infant Baptism unlawful. Yet this is exactly the method of reasoning pursued by those persons in the present day who argue that infants were not baptized in the first ages of Christianity, upon the ground that they find no express record of it in Holy Scripture. The Book of the Acts of the Apostles contains the missionary records of the early Church. And if in these records no mention is found of infants having been baptized, the reason is,

⁷ 1 Cor. i. 16.

⁸ Acts xvi. 15.

⁹ Acts xvi. 33.

first, that the early converts being necessarily adults, the early baptisms were necessarily those of adult persons; and, secondly, that when once the parents and heads of families were baptized, the Baptism of their children, as belonging to them, and as being parts of themselves, would follow as a matter of course. The general silence upon Infant Baptism, with all these circumstances taken into account, is therefore an argument rather in its favour than against it; and hence we affirm, that those who reject it are rather bound to produce an express command against, than we any positive order for, receiving infants into covenant with God according to the universal custom of the Church.

Let us now proceed to a few general considerations from Scripture.

If infants had not been baptized, there must have grown up a large body of unbaptized youth, children of Christian parents, between the first preaching of the Apostles and the time when some of the later Epistles were written: but we read of none such, and there are no directions given about them; therefore we conclude that there were no such persons, but that all had been baptized in infancy. Here, again, the silence of Scripture is in favour of Infant Baptism, rather than otherwise: there is indeed a command to "bring up children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord;" but these words rather imply that they had been, as is the case with us, already baptized and made disciples; otherwise, would it not have been added that they should be baptized when old enough?

Again, if children had not been admitted into the Christian covenant, it would have been a great stumbling-block to the Jewish converts, whose elder children had been admitted in infancy into covenant with God: but we never find any objection of the kind even hinted at; therefore we may conclude, that children were received into the Christian covenant, that is, baptized.

Again, whatever may be said respecting heathen children, the offspring of Christian parents have a peculiar title to Baptism. St. Paul declares that "they are holy¹." He says, "the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife by the husband: else were your children unclean; but now are they holy." This text proves one of two things, either that the children of Christian parents are, by virtue of their parents' faith, in a capacity for admission to the privileges of Christianity, that is, in other words, that they are fit subjects for Baptism—an interpretation which is sanctioned by great authorities: or it means, as is held by some of the best and oldest divines, that these children had been actually baptized. St. Paul, as these interpreters argue, is endeavouring to prove to the Corinthians, that conversion to Christianity is no ground for breaking marriage with a heathen partner; and he proves it by two arguments, depending, both of them, upon matter of fact and actual experience.

1st. He observes, "the one hath been sanctified by the other," that is, (as these divines interpret it,) the unbelieving partner has very commonly been converted by the instrumentality of the Christian husband or wife; and so, "how knowest thou, O man,

¹ 1 Cor. vii. 14.

whether thou shalt save thy wife? and how knowest thou, O wife, whether thou shalt save thy husband?" whereas, if you separate, you certainly cannot accomplish so desirable a result.'

2ndly. The Apostle observes, as a reason for the continuance of such marriages, that the faith of the believing partner had generally so far prevailed, that the children had been baptized: "else were your children unclean; but now are they holy;" that is to say, they have been admitted (as example proves) to the state of covenanted holiness in Baptism.

Whichever way the text is interpreted, it is very strong in favour of Infant Baptism: according to the latter interpretation, it proves that children in the apostolic age were actually baptized—according to the former, it shows that they are capable of Baptism; and, therefore, that it is unjustifiable to deny them the blessings of that holy ordinance².

Lastly, consider the character and description of little children given by our Lord Himself. He holds them up as examples to believers, and declares that they who would enter into His kingdom must become as little children³. He says, "Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto Me: for of such is the kingdom of Heaven⁴." Now if they are fit members of the kingdom of Heaven above, surely they are fit to be made members of the kingdom of Heaven on earth, the Church, *i.e.* fit to be baptized into the Church. Remember, likewise, how, in addition to

² See this argument at full length in Wall's *Conversations upon Infant Baptism*: No. 94 on the Catalogue of the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

³ Matt. xviii. 3.

⁴ Matt. xix. 14.

rebuking those who would have kept them from Him, "He took them up in His arms, put His hands upon them, and blessed them⁵," proving thereby that they were young children, otherwise He would not have taken them in His arms, and also that they were capable of receiving some spiritual blessing, and therefore, doubtless, fit to receive those blessings which He has covenanted in Baptism to His Church.

Reflect, then, I pray you, upon what has been said. Baptism, according to the general tenor and meaning of Scripture, is the outward sign and means of entering into covenant with God through Christ by faith. Now, from the covenant of Abraham, which was a covenant of faith, infants were not excluded on account of their want of faith; nor from the covenant of Moses, which was a covenant of works, were they excluded on account of their want of works; and therefore they ought not to be excluded from the covenant of promise, the covenant of Jesus Christ, unless there is some express declaration to that effect. No such express declaration is given; the argument drawn from the words "He that believeth," being a false argument, inasmuch as those words do not apply to children at all, but only to those who are capable of believing but refuse to do so; while the command, "Go, teach all nations," is of universal force, both as to time and persons; for 'the infants of mankind, taken together with all such as are under the age at which you receive them, do make, I believe, a third part of the whole people⁶.' Such being the case, the want of any particular direct inti-

⁵ Mark x. 16.

⁶ Wall's Defence, ch. xii.

mation or notice concerning infants is more in favour of those who baptize them than of their opponents; the habits, customs, and knowledge of the persons to whom the command was given being fairly taken into consideration. Moreover, if there are not positive proofs that children were baptized, there are in the New Testament expressions and circumstances leading us to believe that children, more especially those of Christian parents, are fit and proper objects for Baptism. Reflect upon this, and I think you will be led to admit that the Article of our Church is not incorrect in saying that, 'The Baptism of young children is in any wise to be retained in the Church as most agreeable with the institution of Christ.'

Now, my friend, let me ask you in serious and solemn earnest this all-important question, In what light do you regard your children before they have been baptized? What Scriptural grounds have you for expecting their salvation if they die, unless they are united to Christ? And how can they be united to Christ, unless by the means which He Himself has appointed? An appeal to God's infinite and uncovenanted mercy is not a Scriptural argument upon which to ground your expectation; and even a hope that they are in some sense believers will hardly avail, inasmuch as it is a reason rather for than against their Baptism. Infants have original sin, and it is only for the merits of Christ that that sin will be pardoned; but those merits must be applied to the individual by the means which Christ Himself has appointed for that purpose. Remember what the

Almighty said concerning circumcision, "The soul that is uncircumcised shall be cut off, he hath broken My covenant." Remember, too, that this applied to children directly after they were eight days old ; and remember, that in His dealings with men, He sometimes visits the sins of the fathers upon the children. Nor are Christ's words (if the Church, from the time of the Apostles, have rightly interpreted them) less binding upon you than the law of circumcision on those of old ; for if He commanded His Apostles to baptize all nations, it may be fairly argued, that all nations are bound to receive Baptism, under pain of the consequences of their refusal.

I know well that you cannot give any Scriptural reasons for your hopes upon this point. One of your best writers boldly declares, that children go to Heaven whether they are baptized or not ; but he does not attempt to produce the slightest Scriptural support in favour of his assertion ; while, it is well known, that there are doubts and difficulties in the minds of many who do not have their children baptized, to smother or subdue which, you are obliged to employ all kinds of unscriptural arguments.

I have myself seen the mother, whose child has been suffered to die unbaptized, like Rachel, weeping for her children, and refusing to be comforted, because they are not. In the questions which she put to me as to my opinion respecting the future state of her son, there was a sad uncertainty, a mixture of hope and doubt, a something hidden, which she cared not to reveal, yet could not entirely suppress. As a man, I could not but hope for the best ; as a minister I had no authority, but the authority of

Scripture ; and from Scripture I could offer her no welcome assurance. She told me, with a melancholy air, that she derived some comfort from the fact of his having been kind-hearted and obedient : and from his having prayed occasionally, she hoped he was a believer ; and, ‘ After all, sir,’ she added, ‘ what good can a little water do ?’

Alas ! Scripture speaks very differently ; “ he that believeth and is baptized shall be saved.” ‘ A little water ;’ this is one of the grand secrets of your error. You forget whose all-powerful word accompanies that ‘ little water.’ You do not look upon the Sacraments ordained by Christ in His Church in the proper light ; you regard them, at best, as mere ordinances for those who are confirmed and full believers, in the highest sense of the word, who, if your views were correct, would then hardly require them. You do not regard them as means of grace, the one to be applied to us on our first coming to Christ, and the other continued to us for our support through the after stages of our Christian course. You call them ‘ mere ordinances,’ I repeat ; and thus, too often, like others who have swerved from “ the faith once delivered to the saints,” professing to believe the Gospel, professing to build on faith, professing to honour Christ above all things, you, in fact, (though it is to be hoped not wilfully,) dishonour Him, because you thereby make Him the author of a dead legal institution. Professing to believe the Gospel, you refuse to credit it when contrary to your own opinions ; and professing to build on faith only, you are wanting in one of its highest, happiest, and choicest exercises—the faith that follows simply and

confidingly where He leads, and which beholds Him through His Sacraments. But could you be persuaded to bring your little ones in faith to the baptismal font; could you be induced to come, 'nothing doubting but that Christ favourably alloweth that charitable work of yours in bringing your infants to His holy Baptism, and that He will embrace them with the arms of His mercy;' then would you behold in the service, not a bare form, not an unmeaning ceremony, but a living, and a life-giving Sacrament: then would you feel convinced that they were engrafted into Christ's Church, and that being engrafted into the Church, they possessed a right to the full privileges of that Church: then, too, if they were early removed from this world, you would have the covenanted promise dependent on the words of Christ, that they were taken to the communion of saints above. This view of Baptism, my friend, agrees expressly with the language of St. Paul,—“Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, by the washing of regeneration (Baptism), and the renewing of the Holy Ghost^s.”

^s Titus iii. 5.

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